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Sensitivity Techniques In Learning

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ABSTRACT

There has been a marked increase in the use of sensitivity techniques in recent times. Popular and professional references have flourished with technical articles describing sensitivity used for various objectives which focus on the reactions of the individual or the group in response to encounter. In spite of the available information, many misconceptions persist about sensitivity. The purpose of this paper is to define sensitivity and relate it to the individual in a learning environment. By tracing a picture of legitimate objectives and applications, a better perspective should emerge as to suitable conditions for its use. Finally, the results of experimentation using sensitivity in a management training and development program will be described so that others might profit, and apply this bold innovation in learning.

INTRODUCTION

There are several definitions of sensitivity which in its broader context encompasses these forms; the training group or T-Group; the workshop; the laboratory; or the encounter group. The most significant and vital difference between these terms and conventional learning experiences are that they involve a group rather than one individual.

Sensitivity training includes a variety of approaches which apply human relations, group relations, group dynamics, and possibly various verbal and non-verbal experiences to the learning process in an effort to increase awareness and develop human potential. Sensitivity training is learning in a small social organization by understanding individual behavior in the group as a result of group-generated experience instead of having a teacher present to interpret data. Sensitivity training may also involve special forms, such as the personal growth group or the marathon in which communication and leadership skills are stressed. Sensitivity training may be used to describe any learning experience which is prompted by encountering human problems, a technique Carl Rogers feels may be the most important social invention of the century. It can also be a group of people devoted to Maslow's concept of self-actualization, hence called the actualization group. Sensitivity training has been called group therapy and is associated with emotional communication, and it has even been referred to as 'dangerous-pseudo-psycho-therapy.' Another term, the laboratory experience may be defined as a leaderless group without an agenda who have as a sole criteria interaction. These are but a few of several definitions which are either explicitly stated or carefully implied in recent sources of information.

The various definitions of sensitivity cover a wide latitude of learning possibilities, and because of this, most people, frankly, are confused by the term "sensitivity", and have only a vague image colored by the most recent positive or negative article they have consumed. Since this is not the place to dogmatically defend sensitivity, only the potential positive benefits of group learning experience will be explored. At the same time, a carefully organized research design on learning theory would discover several "theories of learning" such as, a cognitive process, or a motivational process. While the reasons for assuming the success of sensitivity in the learning process are not explored, it should be emphasized that there is nothing offensive or contradictory between group learning experience and these traditional learning theories. Therefore, one should
assume that sensitivity can be reconciled with traditional learning theory and that its application be considered a supplementary tool to improve learning process efficiency.

INDIVIDUAL VERSUS GROUP EXPERIENCE

The human development process in our society occurs along with strong emphasis on the individual and his performance as one man. The child leaves a self-centered home and enters the school system. There for the first time he is required to make social adjustments but these requirements are minimal. During a protracted phase extending from grammar school through a college career, the individual competes for grades academically and perhaps for awards in athletics. Whether one examines scholastic achievement, or athletic prowess, our system rewards the best, or the most, with special recognition and its trappings. Thus, in order to succeed, a child is taught to excel by being intensely competitive.

Now the trained young adult joins the labor force. There is a strong likelihood that his employer will be a large organization that typifies concentration and large scale operations which intermesh with the economic realities of our time. Firms are: big businesses, conglomerates, part of Galbraith's military industrial complex, or in McLuhan's electron controlled age. Large organizations or bureaucracies rely on the division of labor which, Durkheim first noted, is causing our society to change. After competing and achieving on an individual basis for years, our man joins a group where he must assimilate and function in support of group objectives.

The transition from performing as an individual, to that of performing as part of the group can involve a painful adjustment. Self perceived roles frequently differ from group perceived images and when the differences are unresolved conflict appears. Communication and performance suffer. The individual in this situation must suddenly reverse long held beliefs because as far as the organization is concerned, cooperation is more important than competition. In organizations that do not specifically reward cooperation, competition and individualism may still be the rule. These are called autocratic or paternalistic organizations where power is dispensed in accordance with all the legality implied by the superior/subordinate relationship. However, the growth of knowledge industry to sustain a high rate of technology requires large organizations with scarce resources and requires a management style which is participative. These firms need team effort and team decision making and because they are competing in dynamic markets which are in a constant technology flux, they must be attentive to special needs. The present day challenge, as imperative, is for organizations to undergo continuous revision or change by adopting a special attitude to encourage self-renewal.

The modern corporation cannot avoid a decision on the question of which management style to select. If it remains autocratic or paternalistic, it is almost destined to a future of stagnation and decay. It is unfortunate in our own country where opportunity and prosperity have reigned eternally that there are so many sick industry examples. What happened to these former industry goliaths: railroads, shipbuilding, coal mining, or commercial fishing?

If the corporation chooses innovation as a way of life then it must have adaptive or participative management. Instead of decay, it can expect growth; instead of being in business, it can receive plaudits for fulfilling its social responsibility by contributing towards mankind's betterment. Proof by example also exists for the second organizational style: the computer, business equipment, drug, and electronics industries have all experienced higher than average growth. They also employ large numbers of scientific personnel and rely heavily on changing technology.

Naturally, top management should be intent on improving performance and now comes the practical relationship with our subject, assuming management can objectively evaluate their style. They can choose between the two described models. Many already know McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y and the assumptions which support the thesis. In moving towards the participative organization these relations receive special emphasis. In vertical order listed, compare the change in attributes as the organization moves from competition to cooperation in these prime areas: superior/subordinate relationships, responsibility, supervision, conflict resolution, and communication.
While Theory X is predicated on the rational-economic man and is patently exaggerated, it does result in friction, restricted communication and win/lose game activity. However, Theory Y is predicated on self-actualizing man, willing and motivated to work under the right conditions. The group becomes the vehicle through which the employee meets his needs and he is freer to communicate. Communication is a right condition. The greatest difference between both organization styles is noted in the area of communication. In fact, communication is a pivotal point, the deciding factor on whether management is X or Y; and on whether the firm is rigid or flexible; whether it resists change or welcomes change. Sensitivity techniques apparently have greatest influence on communications within the group.

OBJECTIVES OF SENSITIVITY TRAINING

The laboratory experience is usually employed by the behavioral scientist with several group goals in mind. The sheer diversity of ends has caused further confusion over means in that results or objectives are plural. The area of improved communication is frequently at the top of any list of intentions. The communication problem is linked with interpersonal feelings which the laboratory sessions attempt to deal with one by one. There is no agenda usually, so one cannot categorically rank the order in which the group discusses problems. Here are some typical goals chosen at random along with a brief rationale or explanation.

The lab attempts to bring suppressed sources of group conflict into the open. By bringing up problems, they can be openly discussed and democratically dispatched. There is no promise of problem solution or elimination. However, the background of many employees is such that certain subjects become unmentionable in the group. The taboo associated with discussing problems openly and resolving conflict stems from a self-generated system of moral values which may be referred to as part of the group culture. Again, the autocratic organization perpetuates these values: don't rock the boat, conflict avoidance, and a complete separation of personal feelings from group functions. A familiar scene is the cliché of a young person entering the organization taken aside by an older, mature veteran and give the sage advice that he is to work hard, mind his own business, and stay out of trouble. He quickly senses that personal feelings are not expressed in this kind of closed environment although personal problems are often released within the informal group. The informal group may be considered a sub-culture that exists to satisfy needs without having legitimacy.

A closely related goal of sensitivity and probably connected as a source of conflict, is to identify perceptual differences. The individual has one perception of his role in the group; on the other hand, the group may perceive a different role. If the group does not take time to discuss the matter, the existing difference might never be recognized. This occurs in spite of the fact that perceptual differences cause problems. How often have you heard that, "Our problem is semantics" or "There is a lack of communication around here"?

The laboratory may merely attempt to have group members express personal feelings openly. The most rugged and brazen individual often can be painfully shy in expressing personal feeling. The act of publicly confessing fear, guilt, love, or other deep emotional conviction has been stigmatized by our "rugged" society as being a sign of weakness, immaturity, or an inability on the part of the individual to cope with his problems. Thus, deep emotional feelings are not expressed publicly or in the group, and efficiency suffers.

A premature understanding of human relations is often suspect. Person A does not disagree with person B, because A thinks it will be upsetting. Thus, A denies himself the chance to vent a legitimate objection, and B remains ignorant of A's feelings while he continues actions which are provoking his work partner. This condition obviously interferes with the functioning of the group. The laboratory might be used to teach people to openly express feeling, feel embarrassment yet retain job security by being free of recrimination, thus avoiding prolonged hardship.
A frequently mentioned goal is that of developing authenticity in human interaction. It is not quite the exact problem of expressing a feeling in the group but more of a demand on the individual that he honestly render opinions and engage in frank dialogue at all times both inside and outside of the group.

Once feelings are expressed, the laboratory experience might be used as a vehicle to help integrate important feelings. They can be linked in congruence so that personal needs and group needs are satisfied in unison. If they are out of phase, there is dissonance and then the individual is unhappy with his job, or, his supervisor is unhappy with the employee's performance. Seeking goal congruence improves the organizational climate.

It is possible to use the laboratory as a means of developing group feeling and group solidarity. Dedicated employees are motivated with less effort and seem to work better if they identify with the group. A management theme of the sixties has been that synergy is an invaluable hallmark of the successful organization. The synergistic organization takes two and two and defies Einstein's Law by getting an effect of five. Contradictory as this may seem, the complementation of skills on a team does produce a unit with more problem-solving resources than its separated parts. Traditional educational institution forms teach individual skills. Students might never have studied the process of utilizing skills in a group, thus the laboratory experience is responsible for integration.

We live in an increasingly verbal world that contradicts physical expression. In some relationships, usually not associated with organizational behavior, the individual has suppressed natural physical expression for so long and has been so ineffective in communicating, that close friends and loved ones are alienated by his behavior or verbal conversation. Under these conditions, the non-verbal laboratory experience may be utilized to build greater life satisfaction, change life styles, and give the individual a better appreciation of life by developing his capacity to enjoy life. Encounter groups give people a chance to exchange ideas which may increase human potential and lead to greater human awareness. Although encounter groups are a recent appurtenance of our society, already over 200 growth centers have been established. Many of these centers are administered by persons with questionable qualifications resorting to occult and mystical practices. For example, Yoga and Zen represent an attempt to have occidental man sample the spiritual and meditational aspects of oriental man. The substance and techniques of these growth centers is not an issue for criticism; rather, it is the damage done to the legitimate sensitivity experience by a few charlatans that evokes my consternation. The foes of sensitivity often compound their lack of understanding by using these undesirable cases to generalize about the subject.

Since it has been raised, there are valid objections to the use of the sensitivity lab in learning. The objectors can be silenced by scientific evidence. In other words, research designs may call for the use of sensitivity with predictable results. At the same time, the technique is not a panacea for all group ills. Enough data have been generated from past labs to suggest when sensitivity as a technique will assuredly fail, e.g., don't use sensitivity, and when circumstances exist which predict success, e.g., use sensitivity. The next section deals with some of the applications of sensitivity to learning that have been generally successful.

**SENSITIVITY APPLICATIONS**

Over twenty years of accumulated data exist on sensitivity. Yet, in terms of our knowledge of technique, or with regard to organizational design, we are in our infancy. Group dynamics literature is appearing in geometric progression while specialists are trying to digest theory proposed years ago. Kurt Lewin did pioneering work in field theory in the thirties, and Frederick Perls developed many of his ideas which relate to sensitivity, in the forties. Perhaps the recent popularity of the subject is the result of an interdisciplinary effort because management-organization specialists have been influenced more by other behavioral sciences, such as, anthropology, psychiatry, psychology, sociology and even theology. No single profession can take exclusive credit for the sensitivity movement.

In general, the various disciplines agree that the product of a sensitivity session is learning. It is usually learning
resulting from study of the process by which a group functions and not from study of the job or its content. A committee studying proposed taxation legislation using Robert's Rules of Order might be a good example. Offer this committee sensitivity training and only the process of leadership, order of recognition, functioning of Roberts Rules, communications, etc., would be significant. Studying the task (how) would be comparable to traditional learning of skills while studying the interaction process via sensitivity is human relations training.

The term which best conveys the most frequent application of sensitivity is organizational development. OD represents a planned effort to change the organization and make it better. It involves the total system and usually starts with the top. It is a design for increased organization effectiveness and health. OD programs deal with conflict, change, attitudes, and development processes which will insure continuous self-renewal. The de jure use of sensitivity is that it must be a part of an OD program; the de facto use of sensitivity contradicts our explanation. Sensitivity is used without OD for informal groups formed on an ad hoc basis with no mission. The only learning benefits claimed for this research pertain to the use of sensitivity in a legitimate OD program, as results with stranger groups in week-end encounters or marathons suggest more entertainment value than educational value in some cases.

Sensitivity has been used to successfully train sales people who deal with the public under trying circumstances.

It has been used successfully to change colleges experiencing disruption from friction caused by competing groups—administration, faculty, and students.

It has been used by churches to better relate members' needs to traditional church hierarchy and values, and to produce changes via intergroup relations.

It has been used to help ease the strain of changing management philosophy from one style to another. Again this could be an emphasis of intergroup feelings combined with interpersonal feelings.

Sensitivity is being used more frequently in community development work. Neighborhoods faced with explosive racial tension have placed police leaders and street gang leaders together forcing them to recognize the other side's perception of problem causes. The hoped for results are a lessening of tension, preservation of property, law and order, and a better climate. Conditional tension has been lessened by having police restrain use of force, and encouraging racial leaders to use legalistic channels of change instead of mob action. Since personal attitudes are linked with deep-seated conviction on the matter of racial problems, it has been gratifying to find a technique that is promising.

If learning is considered a change of attitude then sensitivity appears to be one of the most effective techniques for stimulating the necessary change. In sensitivity, the peer group interacts with the individual by helping him reject group dissonant attitudes while reinforcing group congruent attitudes. The process is simply one of rejection versus approval and since the normal tendency is to avoid rejection, the message reaches home quickly. Traditional learning via the superior/subordinate model appears to be inferior to the method which matches peer to peer.

In a barrage levelled at universities, Carl Rogers and others have charged that they are among our most antiquated institutions. Instead of relating to the present world, they cloister themselves by teaching past verities that are no longer relevant and insisting on such things as rote, doing so with autocratic and dictatorial force. Rogers proposes that our entire educational system be changed from the superior/subordinate or autocratic system, to peer group learning; he wants a process-conscious system which would have democratic features. The felt need for such changes obviously exists if one views daily riots and student disorders as group conflict caused by unyielding, unchanging academia.

Much of the past emphasis in management training and development was extremely autocratic. The possible exceptions to this statement were programs that began to abandon the lecture in favor of the directed case study. In most instances, content control is firmly exercised with the case study method so it does not assume sensitivity characteristics of no structure and no agenda. The strong feature of the case study is that content and process are studied simultaneously and if the group has diverse opinions and generates a lively
discussion, attitudes change. Since changing attitude values should receive about equal stress with training for skills, here is an example of how one management training program employed sensitivity in the learning process.

MANAGEMENT TRAINING USING SENSITIVITY

A large international corporation committed to manpower development set up an off-site training program in basic management subjects. The review of the first year students' evaluations suggested program weaknesses which would have to be remedied. These students had been presented material in the traditional lecture method by top-rated professionals, yet the results were disappointing. The autocratic university method of learning had to be modified.

First, the reasons for the lack of student commitment were studied. The students were mature, self-made men; many of them had vast personal fortunes. They were not accustomed to taking orders because for the most part they gave the orders in organizations where they came from. Most of the men had completed their formal education over twenty years previously. The group was a cross sample of some who had not finished high school and others with college and post graduate degrees. Needless to say, the students themselves privately expressed fear and apprehension over their return to school after so many years. Most of the men had developed definite, fixed attitudes towards management topics, which had been reinforced by years of experience, possession of authority, the bearing of responsibility and learning from trial and error while operating in large organizations. The typical manager-student thought he knew all there was to know, or all he needed to know, and as proof of this attitudes were immodest. Group subjects often let it be known that they had pocketed personal fortunes while surviving the onslaught of a very competitive industry.

Only two things phased this typical manager. His operation was usually number two in the industry behind a long acknowledged leader. Then on the question of profit, he wasn't quite sure whether he could have done better had he been well trained, albeit he had done well. These two reasons appeared to have been the primary motivating factors for getting this very independent individual off-site and into the two-week training program as a paid member.

The management training and development consultants took this into consideration and felt that, in this case, attitudes loomed as the larger of two problems when compared with obsolete skills. Thus, a program design would have to include content/skill sections and process/attitude sections or legs. The two week calendar was retained and divided about equally between the former using traditional lectures, and the latter for which no existing educational model seemed exactly appropriate.

There were these additional considerations. The consultants wanted to use sensitivity, but the company training coordinators felt that the move was too radical in a subject area that had previously used lectures. The students were from a conservative segment of industry. The consultants maintained that if there was no emotional reinforcement to strengthen learning, the contents of the program would be quickly forgotten and there would be no change of attitude. There is validity in this phrase: "If your guts aren't churning, you aren't learning!" Controlled emotional involvement was desired by the consultants and agreed to as an objective by the company training coordinators.

There was the matter of strong student anxiety. As long as it existed, could it be channeled into the learning process and dealt with or should the instructors risk effectiveness by ignoring anxiety? Analysis indicated it was prompted by a compound effect. There were some younger men in the program. Intense competition developed because they had more formal education than the older men, but weren't their equal in terms of salary or experience. Thus, the young resented the old and vice versa. The young were much more participative and demonstrative than the older men. Evidently, some of the older men did feel a need for self-protective action. Namely, they said very little for fear of saying the wrong thing on theoretical problems. One finds the turtle reflex operating everywhere as people who "don't want to get involved" pass up opportunities to enrich their lives for the sake of risk and conflict avoidance.

With gradual experimentation, the pure sensitivity group which is leaderless and operates without an agenda was abandoned
and replaced with a modified version intended to retain all of the benefits of the pure lab while shedding the negative features. The final design consisted of lectures to the group en masse, interspersed with small group decision making with five man units. It was a design for the integration of affective and content learning. A long case was developed for the competing teams or units, and it was impossible for them to operate without developing a multi-directional communication network. No man could dominate a team, as he needed the support and information of all other members. The role playing simulation was excellent; commitment to the task seemed genuine, emotional, and realistically believable. This occurred because the roles were very carefully structured like a poker hand. Each man played for his own stakes; yet, all were committed to the game. Each man was deeply involved because his team was in competition with the other teams. Four men played roles according to design while the fifth man acted as a process observer. Periodically the team would suspend intensive role playing and try to get feedback from the process observer. The consultants also acted as process observers or resource experts. While dual-functioning is not recommended in a regular OD program, it worked satisfactorily for a small training group.

The results of this learning approach were favorable but not consistent in degree. The individual change agent, or consultant, and the amount of time that could be allocated to each team were key variables in the post-administrative evaluation. Collected data from the experience suggested that without sufficient trainer capacity or with large numbers of students, the training design would have to be altered for it to succeed. Nevertheless, the training program succeeded in its organizational behavior objectives as well as in its content learning objectives simultaneously. Men learned they were human and that they made errors, as did other individuals in the group. The young, and the old, those with degrees, and those with experience, those with confidence, and those who were anxious—all made substantial attitude corrections by seeing the other point of view. Men learned and became closer friends by sharing the knowledge that personal growth can result from taking risks in the group. They found out that trial and error experience were valued beyond the safety of conflict and risk avoidance. They learned that interaction is better than not relating, not acting, or doing nothing. The group learning experience did not result in rejection for making mistakes but rather emphasized the rewards for a job well done.

CONCLUSIONS

People who must function in groups can profit from sensitivity and learning about the process versus skills. The peer group is a very effective vehicle for the transmittal of knowledge to the older, mature person which possibly surpasses traditional learning methods when the emphasis is placed on attitude change.

The games and role playing simulations were heavily based on sensitivity techniques and were thoroughly enjoyed by the students involved. Learning objectives were usually met more rapidly than would have been possible by traditional methods. Students claimed to have gained a greater insight and authenticity in interpersonal relations which they promised to carry home to their organizations.

The implication was favorable for adoption and further use of sensitivity in a management training and development program. Although no cost-benefit analysis has been provided, it would appear that costs are comparable with figures for traditional methods when used with small groups.

REFERENCES

5. Ibid., p. 38.


